DISPARATE
MINDS
LITTLE GIFTS

Little Gifts

Six *Disparate Minds* Vignettes, Minus One

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"It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

"Little Gifts"
A Seasonal Aperitif,
Stores, Money, Scrooge, Synchronicity
Trees, Spots on Countertops, Love,
and Good Will to All Who Need It

Part I

Avenue was different in the winter. Just a bit. The place was always cold, dark, and grey, so it was, one might argue, generally *winter-y* to begin with. The autumn felt especially brief, especially incidental; around these parts, of course, most called it the fall, and fittingly so. This year was no exception; it had almost certainly been only a few days since Halloween. But it was hard to judge. Time was always a matter of perspective, but in Avenue, it was more so. Days stretched out into eternities or were gone in flashing moments.

So it wasn't wrong when the decorations came. One morning, on each house, there were Christmas decorations. It was as if people had put them all up at once. It was surely an astounding act of synchronicity. They had just appeared overnight, as if placed on each home by something in the dark, treading down the street. But that was Serena being paranoid because she had forgotten to put them up herself. And besides, no one acted as if anything was wrong? Why would they?

This was normal.

Serena had promised herself that she would do her shopping early, because otherwise she (very intentionally) didn't remember. It wasn't that she didn't engage in it, but Serena didn't *believe* in capitalism. She did not enjoy that it was a season of buying, purchasing. There was encouragement of that in the air. Air that wanted you to *buy*. Air that always left her breathless.

Normal Air.

She didn't want to be a Scrooge. She knew that wasn't appropriate. She had to get things. Sitting around brooding never *really* went over well with anyone. She didn't need to give people ammunition. *Do it now,* they told her. If you don't get the shopping over with, the stores will be picked over come Black

Friday. Worst of all would be disappointing Anthea. Things had been tremulous in that regard; it was best not to push one's luck.

The local stores were always a tribulation to visit. There was usually a large gutsy man with a blonde goatee wearing a greasy, floppy wife-beater tank-top. He stood by the door. He would say something like: "It is dark lately," and Serena could never really tell whether he was trying to be intimidating or whether he was talking about the weather. It was never the same man.

Today she was visiting the *Avenue Big Shop*. It was a hollowed out old Walmart that people had populated, filling the racks with their little stalls. Serena always felt proud of places like this. Avenue was a place that encouraged you to let things go a bit. Let it get worse. But places like this held the line.

The man at the door (who, today, was a brown-haired, gutsy man with a goatee — really shaking up the formula, this one) muttered: "I don't know who I am."

Serena felt bad, but she couldn't do anything.

Her sneakers clicked and squeaked on the linoleum. She grabbed a shopping cart, embedded in a pile of other abandoned shopping carts. She pulled it out. Its wheel, too, squeaked a little. *Relatable*.

Shopping. She knew what to get Wick. They were the kind of person that was easy to shop for. So outgoing in their variable interests and willing to inform you exactly what they wanted, unprompted. It was almost hard to decide what *not* to get Wick. If it had a franchise name on it, they were almost certainly interested.

She walked along the aisles, passing booths of objects. Each specifically organised by little bazaar owners, who were frankly uncategorizable. There were old women, burly large men, drag artists, spindly middle-aged hoteliers with pencil moustaches, and someone Serena was almost certain was a twelve year old. The cart squeaked.

June was a little tougher to figure out what to get for. She seemed so high-strung. Serena found a nice sweater. It wasn't an ugly Christmas Sweater; it was actually quite nice. The fabric was, perhaps, a little on the thinner side, but that was probably a good thing. June was always overheating, no matter the temperature.

"How much?" she asked the stall owner, who looked at her with clasped hands.

"Three," he stated. His hands did not move.

She waited a moment for him to specify. "Three what?"

"Whatever you have," returned the man. It was not a desperate tone, but it was not a suave one either.

She narrowed her eyes at him. This guy was *so* not worth it. Agreements were not to be made with the vague. She turned herself and the cart, and moved on down the aisles.

Last Christmas I gave you my heart, the song said.

Serena continued to walk through the store, eyeing the stalls carefully. All kinds of people looked back at her. Some of them were vaguely plaintive. She wondered if the people were like her, if some of them didn't want to be here.

She should come back later. Even if the shelves are picked over, at least she'd be in the right mindset. It's just too early for her right now. Right?

There was always a rush of anxiety around this time of year for her. The fear of there being so much to do — and yet, at the same time, the anticipation. Which was the delight of it. It was probably why she cared about Christmas at all, to begin with. Getting things, giving things, the decorations and the time with people, those were all great. But other holidays sort of gave that. Christmas had a unique anticipation to it that made it worthy. And the further you pushed that back into the year, the more likely it was for that anticipation to be… diluted?

She really *was* sounding like a Scrooge, wasn't she? Eh. Critics could be right from time to time. But it *was* worth it. She would make the others happy. She usually didn't manage that. So it meant more, really.

The music was on, the decorations were up, and whether it was out of avarice or cheer, it had begun all the same. The season. Overnight or not. Things meant different things to different people. Holidays all the more so. Maybe tomorrow she'd be more in the spirit.

Maybe the reason Christmas had come so early this year was because they needed it. Always seemed like the sky was falling in, that the world was just getting worse… maybe it came earlier to come to the rescue. A counterbalance, a lighthouse glowing by the bleak rocks.

That made sense. She had hardly ever seen Avenue so full with light.

Well done, everyone… we're halfway out of the dark.

Part II

The cold air bit at her skin, which left it brittle, and she could feel her blood pulsing through her body as she walked — motorised by the thought that she had places to be.

Somehow, this year, June felt like she was deeper *into* the holiday spirit than ever. She needed it, really. This was the first Christmas without her mother, without her relatives hanging over her like lichen. Oh, you had better believe she could do without them all bursting in and giving each other big bottles of alcohol in wrapping that made it quite obvious what the substance was before it was even unwrapped, and shrieking: "*Oh! It's just what I wanted!*".

This was the chance to make up for all those Christmases they'd stolen. *She would have everything be perfect.* She had the gifts, but it was a late date and currently, they didn't have a tree at all. The bar would do well with having a tree. They just hadn't got around to it. But it needed a tree, really. And that was why she was walking.

There was no Christmas Tree Farm or whatever nearby. It wasn't tonally accurate for Avenue to have a Christmas Tree Farm. It would have been wrong. The season changed Avenue a bit — frankly it was nothing like anything she'd seen here before, she wasn't used to seeing the place like this — but a spade was still a spade. At most, if Avenue had made an effort and sprouted a Christmas Tree Farm, it would have been abandoned, grown into a wood, a wood dripping with black peat, and there would have been a dark foreboding boxcar in the woods. Probably with the entire cast of *Fargo* inside it.

She stopped by the convenience store in the cold. She knew this kind of place well. It was small and it had *opinions* — it aggressively wanted you to buy candy, pretzels, and nicotine. But it was a moment outside of the cold landscape. Which she needed. Just for a second.

She hated the cold like this. It was bitter, but it didn't have the decency to at least snow. She loved the snow. She loved going out with a shovel, clearing driveways.

"Buying anything or just sitting?" asked the man at the cash register, washing down the counter with a spray bottle.

June looked back out at the windy, blister covered landscape. "Sit for now," she mumbled.

"Aight," the gruff man agreed.

He continued to scrub. Country music about breakups, beers and trucks fluttered indistinctly in the background of the room. He hummed along. He was large, nearly obese, probably, and his uniform was denim overalls, frayed. He had a nametag on his uniform that said RICHARD in big letters, but June felt she didn't know him enough to call him that yet. She felt if she said it out loud, he would snap at her about how she knew his name — and then she'd have to remind him about the name tag, and it would be — as she'd have put it — 'a whole *thing*, you know?' He was a stranger. He wasn't really a Richard, not for her, not yet. He was just some kind of a guy.

She sat in this for a moment, wondering what to say. Even going to the store here always felt so much more personal than what she was used to. "Do you have a coffee?" June asked. "I'll pay."

"Machine in the corner," the man said. "It's pretty bad though."

"How bad?"

"Pretty bad."

"How bad is pretty bad?"

"So bad I can't really charge for it. I recommend the cocoa, that's a bit better."

June nodded. He left the counter and walked over to the machine in the back. June's eyes did not follow him. She kept looking at the landscape. Still looked like fall. The trees were bare and the ground was brown with leaves.

She sat down at a little table next to an aisle of popcorn and potato chips. So strange these stores had places to sit in them here. They were in-between places as far as she knew, every time she had ever seen one they were always near gas stations and you went in and out as fast you could. But of course, it was different here. Without the big department stores or grocers, the in-between places were fairly essential.

The linoleum floor was cold, even through the soles of her shoes. After a bit of sitting, she did not let her feet touch the ground. She fiddled with her little cross necklace absentmindedly, and the two of them sat in the silence. June had a lot to think about.

"First Avenue winter?"

"What?" June asked. She hadn't been paying attention.

The man at the counter smirked, but not in an unfriendly way. She felt she knew him, or at least people like him. He was a good man. "Is this your first Avenue Winter?" he repeated.

"Uh, yeah, I suppose." June smiled awkwardly. "How could you tell?"

"You aren't dressed for it. Warmest we've ever had, this year," the man muttered in a low, depressed growl. It was clearly a passionate topic for him. "Sometimes I feel like climate change's gonna end the world. We're just gonna heat on up like a stovetop until we bubble over."

June nodded solemnly, sipping her cocoa. It was thin and water-y, which probably meant there was chocolate sludge at the bottom. She tried to stir it.

"Though that sure ain't a popular opinion." He continued. "Relatives — well, I say relatives — my relatives of circumstance sure can't stand me thinkin' that way. Suppose the bubble over part's a bit defeatist. Still. You understand, right?"

"Yeah," June said. "I getcha. I try to do my bit. Sure doesn't feel like much."

"Sure don't," He chuckled.

June didn't want to talk about this. It was ruining her mood. Things were going to be good this year. That was how it had to be, right?

"Do you know where you could get, like, a Christmas tree around here?" June asked.

"Probably not safe to check the woods," he said, as casually as anything.

June laughed. She felt a little embarrassed, even if she had known that to begin with. Of *course* it wasn't a good idea to check the woods. That's why this whole business hadn't taken two seconds.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," she told him. "Totally, that makes sense, I get it. You know, it's just… fairly close to it, you know? Christmas? I'd just really like one."

"Fair's fair. I've never looked for a tree, really. This time of year gets me down."

"I think it does most people," June said hesitantly. "I was always taught it was about mindset. I… tell myself …that I'm going to have a good year."

"Does that work?" He asked.

June winced. She probably sounded like a condescending high-school teacher. "Sorry. Just — just pretend I didn't say anything there, I think that was rude?"

Richard didn't really see *how* that might have been rude, but he nodded solemnly. He pressed down on the counter again with the washcloth. He would clean this goddamn counter properly today. He could do it. He could definitely do it, if he just buckled down — *plenty of other people can clean counters* —

Poor man, June thought. She didn't know what to do, really. She hardly knew him, but sitting around in the convenience store like this — when it wasn't really even snowing and she didn't know why she was in here and she was probably imposing — that felt very personal, uncomfortable even. He was such a sad guy. She took the last sip of her cocoa. As she had predicted, the chocolate mulch was all at the bottom.

"I'll — I'll come back later," June said.

"You don't have to," Richard mumbled.

"No; no, I will." She said, and she opened the door and stepped outside into the cold.

* * *

God rest ye merry gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's pow'r
When we were gone astray —

There was music in the air as she left the convenience store, trudging by the gas station. June did not know whether it was the aria that did not leave her or the tinny commercial loudspeaker filtering out into the parking lot. They sounded much the same.

At least it was a comforting carol, anyhow, and not one of the many other, far more disconcerting options. She could take or leave the Victorian theology, but a bit of merriment, she could get behind.

June walked into the grey field, looking for anything she could possibly use as a Christmas tree. She didn't mind if it was unusual; so long as it was soulful, *that* would make it perfect. That would make things as they should be.

The grey landscape littered with all the auburn leaves reminded her of home — oh, why did she keep having to think of that old place as *home*? — and the smell of the leaves on the ground made her sniffle. Fall was the worst for allergies, but it was really bad this time of year, since the snow hadn't blocked it all out.

How long had it been since a White Christmas? His words had left her feeling unsafe. She was dreadfully, dreadfully nervous about the climate to begin with… and people talking about it had made it worse. There was always a strange feeling when she was nervous. A slow thing above her stomach, below her heart. It wasn't really pain she felt when she was nervous, exactly. It was… It was…

No, it *was* pain. It had just always been there. Her whole life. She had never recognized it before. How strange!

June felt a strange giddyness that she had realised such a thing was true at all. *She felt in pain when she was nervous.* It was so simple, explained so much that her body made it real for her. How had it taken her twenty-six years to figure that out? Why was every therapist she ever met such a hack?

She wandered out deeper into the field. The leaves crunched under her step, and her nose wrinkled from the dust in the air, but she didn't care. She had found some understanding of herself and that was a rare, rare thing.

Maybe the world wasn't doomed if we could all reflect once in a while — find our little bits of hope.

Speaking of…

She smiled. She saw it just ahead of her. It was *perfect.*

Part III

Wick was a little confused about the Christmas decorations. They'd come out of nowhere, after all — and if someone had only told him, he would have been more than happy to hang up some decorations himself. But no — they had all come up overnight, as if by magic. He thought about whether he should ask Anthea about it. He wasn't sure. He didn't want to bother her. Not with this. He could bother her with something actually important.

They felt less safe lately. Wick wasn't quite sure why. Maybe it was the news. No, it was definitely the news. The outside world was so tempting to look at — whether on the phone or on the television, or whatever. But it was disheartening. Look, but never touch. Watch it get worse. You can't do a thing.

Wick didn't walk places alone anymore. They didn't fear things arising from the dirt, spirits in the forest. Wick had good experience with those, they thought, thinking of Chester's beautiful face. No, lately Wick felt scared of people — of back alleyways and gangs with crowbars.

It was getting so much easier to be lawless.

When Wick walked places with people, they didn't say too much. They didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable, and while he liked the people that decided to help — usually Todd or one of Serena's artist friends — they usually didn't really want to hear Wick ramble about anything, and the only other topic of contention was what Wick *was,* people always had questions. That whole thing of treating queer people like broken glass, terrified of messing up. Wick didn't mind at all when people messed up — it was a very human thing to mess up, and they did it often. It was *important* to mess up, the way Wick saw it. Wick didn't mind it at all. Wick only minded when people were intentional assholes.

Every once in a while, Wick would shake a bit when they passed a flag in some warehouse's window or by someone's front door. Usually a Confederate one, or some horrible deviation of the American flag. It was funny to think about, in a sad sort of way. They weren't in America, certainly not in Kansas anymore, but the wrong people always had a perverted attachment to those sorts of flags. They'd never give it up.

The woman they were walking with — Wick didn't really know her at all, besides the fact that she didn't want to walk alone either — well, she tried to be sympathetic.

"Do you know self-defence?" she asked him one time. "I could teach you."

It was a nice gesture. Wick didn't know what to say about it, though.

"I don't know. I'm much more… the person in the chair. Like. I.T.. Science," Wick said. "It's… not my field."

"Yeah," she said. "But don't you just fuckin *feel like it* sometimes? Like you're sick of not feeling like you can walk down the street as you? Like you just wanna *let someone have it?* Cause they deserve it and you're just minding your goddamn business? That you could wear what you want walking down the street — *knowing* — that anyone who gives any complaints is gonna get a swift kicking?"

Wick thought about it. "I cried when I punched a racist once."

"No! Shit, what?" She laughed.

"Well, I was in middle school — he was up in my face, and he was saying awful things, things I'm not going to repeat, but they were about one of my friends — and I punched him. And I'm — I'm not going to say he didn't deserve it, but he fell on the floor and he had a bloody nose and he — I'd hurt him. And I didn't like it very much, I didn't like seeing someone *hurt* even if — even if — it's …technically… the right thing to do. So I left and cried a bit."

The woman seemed to take in the story, slowly. She nodded after a while, solemn. "...I think that's a bit beautiful, really."

Wick got all flustered. "I, um, what?"

"You're a softie." She smiled gently. "We don't have enough of those."

"What's your name?"

"Janine."

They continued to walk. Wick could feel the air getting colder. And for a brief moment, Wick saw just a few snowflakes drift down from the sky.

The light of the storefront ahead was golden and warm in the blue din of the twilight. Neither of them seemed to remember where their destination was. Perhaps there was something in the walking, or maybe it was the company. Two perfect strangers, chatting in the cold. The streets felt less dangerous with the talking — and Avenue seemed to welcome it.

Part IV

The bell rang on the door of the convenience store, but Richard didn't notice it. He was still trying to scrub the counter. Little voices rang in his ears.

Yet here's a spot. Out, damned spot! out, I say!

He was certain he was never going to be done. He never accomplished anything. Certainly not this time of year. This was the time of year for happy people. Not for *his* sorry ass.

His boss, Randy — he would have his behind. All he did was show up every weekend and cook Strawberry Porridge. He was a lazy fart. Richard didn't like him at all. It was probably mutual. But Richard didn't like himself a bit more than he didn't like Randy. So he understood him.

He remembered when he was young, before Avenue, when a speaker had come to his school to talk about depression. God, it must have been thirty years ago now. They didn't do that shit back then. It was a very special case. A fellow who'd "recovered" from his mental health problems after the war, telling the kids how suicide was not an escape. It was a good message. But he had never thought about killing himself before, and not that he was going to do it or anything, but he thought about it a lot after that. Completely unintended, but still… what a strange thing. Was that what they called reverse psychology?

He scrubbed that counter good. The soap squeaked on the texture of it, the plastic on the wood that was beginning to peel with his washing — all except the black, bulbous bump that was still there, would *always* be there.

"Hello?" a voice said, and Richard looked up, startled.

That girl from earlier was there, the strange nervous one with the dirty blonde hair, the one who had asked for coffee and got cocoa.

"Hi, yeah," she said. "Uh, I'm back."

Richard stood up from the counter. He didn't think she *would* come back, not really. Most people didn't. Most people didn't even talk to him when they came in, just picked things up off the shelves. He had no clue why he had talked to her.

"I've got you a Christmas Tree," she said, placing a strange potted fern down on the ground. It was a teensy bramble of a thing — it reminded him deeply of that trembling stick of a tree from *Charlie Brown.*

"I hope it's good," she added. "I think you need it more than I do."

He felt surprised. It was quite a nice gesture. "You'll — you'll be without a tree this year, though."

"I'll draw one on a big bit of cardboard," she said. "It just needs to have a soul, that's all. That's all I was looking for."

He was moved, he was thankful, he felt so nice. But a thought creeped in, and it held him tightly: "This isn't some kind of charity, is it? Be nice to the poor shithead just because it's Christmas?"

He'd said it without quite meaning to. God. He was awful. He kept ruining things.

But the girl — she didn't miss a beat.

"I liked the cocoa," she said, quietly. "And besides — I *told* you I'd be back."

Richard bit his lip. He was going to say something else, but he didn't. This was nice, and he didn't need to ruin it any further.

"I'll see you next week, Richard," she said, and the bell rang again, and he hardly noticed it, because he was still looking at the tree, its little branches and its little tiny bits of green, complemented by tinsel the girl had surely added on.

Richard smiled tightly. He believed her. What was a nice girl like her doing all this for him for? Because it was Christmas? Get off. So why?

Well. Because she *was* nice, he supposed.

Part V

On the day, Anthea stood up from her bed, and walked over to her counter, methodically turning the page on her 'one a day' calendar. December 25th, it said, although she already knew that. Still — the importance of patterns, of bearing a routine into the world. She put on her silky bathrobe and wrapped a towel around her head, as if she had showered. It was important to her that Christmas mornings were spent in comfort, not artifice.

She opened the door and descended downstairs without great abandon. She was excited, but it would not go anywhere, and she did not care to wake anyone. After all, *she* was always the first to wake. She smiled at the tree in the corner — the drawing of it, scribbled by June on a large bit of cardboard with some marker — but still hung with ornaments, their hooks piercing the cardboard, and still strung with tinsel. Lights were not found anywhere — she had not found any. Still, an effort had been made: one worth applauding, and the cardboard tree was crowded by many gifts. Such wisdom she had taught these little ones.

She reclined by the couch in the corner, reaching for her black coffee, where she had left it the night before. It was cold, but it warmed her hands all the same.

She sat back and listened devoutly. It would be clearer on days like this. It was important to hear.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Yes. These were good words. Omens that she needed dearly. She sipped the brew in anticipation, and she listened to the so many voices and she especially listened to the silence, which was deep in her soul.

* * *

They came down one by one — Serena first, then June, and lastly Wick. Terrance had left the bar for themselves this morning, and so the building was open for them — even if all the drinks and food were locked tight in their cabinets, not to be touched. It was a kind favour. Anthea did not know where he had gone, but she supposed he must have his own friends to visit.

"Who's opening something first?" Wick asked, gently shaking a box.

"Youngest first," June said, to which Serena scoffed indignantly.

"I believe," said Anthea carefully, "that age brings seniority."

"You want to open something first?" June giggled. "How old are you then?"

"Rude!" Wick laughed, and Anthea raised an eyebrow and said no further before selecting a box from under the board-tree.

It was marked *From June*, and Anthea fingered the box gingerly before delicately unfolding the wrapping paper, one crease at a time.

Before long, the package was open, revealing a small silver necklace with symbols engraved into them. Anthea looked at the symbols with a sense of revelry, and clutched it to her chest, a silent 'thank you'.

June smirked. She had no clue what the thing was, other than that it was perfect.

Wick next scampered under the tree like a gremlin, quickly selecting a rectangular box which they tore open with great abandon, revealing a copy of a *Steven Universe* DVD. They thanked June profusely — she thought they'd never stop. It would most certainly be on loop on the television for months.

Serena hesitantly took a box from the tree, unveiling a new set of paintbrushes and ball-point pens. She thanked Wick quickly, and continued to examine the pens intently, filled with fascination. The things she could make with this…

June reached over and took a thin box that was from Serena, and opened it to find a small painting. It was abstract, or nearly so — perhaps, in part, a portrait of her, and, in part, the picture of some sort of air conditioning unit. It was remarkably beautiful, very Serena — June could hardly imagine how much time she must have invested in it. Serena looked embarrassed, muttering something about how "shopping didn't go that well this year," but June hugged her deeply.

There were plenty of other things under the tree — Serena was startled upon unwrapping this year's 'joke' gift, a Mariah Carey CD.

"You *know* I can't stand Mariah!" she laughed at Wick, but Anthea seemed perturbed.

"You are not to say her name out loud." Anthea said, sternly. "She might hear."

"What, like Betelgeuse?" June joked.

The ground shook a little at the word 'Betelegeuse'.

They decided to quickly smash the CD case.

Wick, in turn, received a 'joke gift', from Serena — a light switch ripped from a wall socket, on which she'd written the word NINTENDO in smeared Sharpie.

June unwrapped a piece of coal with a big roll of her eyes, and Anthea's stocking — when they got to that — had been filled to the brim with batteries, a tradition which no one understood but all found amusing.

There were so many *things,* but that wasn't really why it was a good morning. It was because they could laugh a little. It was an excuse to be nice to each other. They needed that, really. Not that they needed an excuse, but with the hustle and bustle of the world, it helped to have a quiet moment. Well, a loud moment, really, but a quiet one all the same.

They were together. They were happy that way, and for a month, there had been no monsters. That was almost certainly what they needed.

We Are

(Thankfully)

Not At Liberty To Release

Part Six

At This Time.

We Will Not Apologise For The Inconvenience.

Have An Adequate Evening.